

# Spousal Caregiving as Couples Age: Readjustment to Living with SCI

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## ABSTRACT

This poster highlights elder spouses as caregivers and a system's intervention model that has been used effectively with late life couples. The model has 2 main goals: (1) to reconfigure the couple system so that it can function more effectively under new stressors and (2) to develop better caregiving, including the expanded utilization of support services, allowing the caregiver to take better care of him or herself.

A 3 stage system's intervention model is outlined. In the first stage, the social worker meets with the couple and listens to their illness story. In the second stage, the clinician takes a more active and directive role, helping the couple utilize the material they have shared for the purpose of healing and restorative action. The goal of the third stage is to help the couple compensate for the usual imbalance in a relationship where one partner is the caregiver and the other the care receiver.

## 3 STAGE MODEL

STAGE 1: The social worker meets with the care receiver in the presence of his/her spouse to listen to their illness story. The focus is on the meaning of the current situation as it relates to the care receiver's history.

The partner is then interviewed about his/her role as a caregiver. The meaning of being a caregiver is explored in relation to his/her history.

STAGE 2: The social worker takes a more active and directive role, assisting the couple to utilize the material shared in Stage 1 for the purpose of healing and restorative action. This is an affective stage where the couple will experience grief, loss, conflict and acceptance.

The social worker should encourage both members of the couple to be honest about their feelings and to be aware of a mutual protection system so often developed in caregiving situations.

STAGE 3: This stage addresses the natural imbalance of give and take found in couples where one partner is ill. The social worker encourages the couple to renegotiate roles that have become less reciprocal.

The overall goal is to renegotiate the “couple contract” to include the needs and limits of the aging caregiving partner as well as those of the care recipient.

### TREATMENT GOALS

1. To reconfigure the couple system to function with the additional stressors of illness and old age.
2. To develop better caregiving through improved communication between the partners and the expanded use of support systems to maintain the well-being of the caregiver.
3. To facilitate a role shift in one or both members of an older couple confronting changes in their health that considers the needs of the caregiver as well as the care receiver.

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